

For someone who is just beginning his career as an outdoor writer—Brent Postal has a very impressive knowledge of fishing. And, a special expertise and enthusiasm for fly-fishing. Brent is a student at Bloomsburg University and member of Pennsylvania Outdoor Writers Association. Brent has written for Trout Unlimited's Trout Magazine. And writes a fly-fishing column for the Lewistown Sentinel. During the summer months Brent can be found in Wyoming, working as a fly-fishing guide. In the future you'll see Brent Postal's work appear more and more often in your favorite fishing publications. Contact: live.outdoor@yahoo.com

How Anglers Stalk & Catch Record Fish

Publishers Introduction

As publishers of Professor Higbee's® Stream and Lake Maps, we've had the opportunity to talk to a lot of anglers at the outdoor shows. Over the years I've talked to several state record holders and many anglers that said they came close to a record. With these conversations as food-for-thought, I realized that these anglers were specifically targeting big fish. There is a big difference between fishing and hoping you'll get lucky, and what could be called "hunting" for really big fish. It takes 10 or more years for a fish to reach "record" size. I wondered how these giant fish were able to evade capture for so many years.

These big fish are in a class of their own with their own unique habits. And, the anglers that stalk them are in their own category. These patient and determined anglers already know and use much of the information contained in this report. And, very few of them are talking.

One day I decided to do some research on the subject. I began by looking at the records contained in the state record fish files. By simply looking at where, when, and on what they were caught, I saw patterns. By looking at these patterns, "secrets" can be sifted from the information. After some more reading on the subject of fishing for trophy fish, I decided to share this information with our friends and customers.

We are associate members of the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writer's Association. So I looked to the POWA membership for a qualified outdoor writer who could turn this information into a report. I was lucky to find Brent Postal, an excellent young and upcoming writer. Brent lives and fly-fishes in Pennsylvania. During the summer months he is a fly-fishing guide in Wyoming. Brent has done an exceptional job with this report. He has put many hours into research and even contacted a list of well-known "fishing pros" for their valuable input.

After reading the information contained here you will realize that there is a formula for catching really big fish. You will get to know the habits of highly successful fish. Big fish are highly successful because they have evaded capture for many years. You'll know the windows of opportunity—those special times when the odds are in your favor. You'll understand how, when and what they feed on. You'll know the best way to present their favorite foods. You'll learn where they live—they live in the choicest spots where the food is plentiful. As the big bullies on the block—they are in control of their spot. You'll learn that you must have the right tools for the job. How to play, battle and land a really big one. What are the best colors for big fish? How do they use their senses? The best moon cycles? What weather makes them active? And, much more is packed into this concise report.

You just can't beat the thrill of stalking, hooking, battling, then landing a really big fish!

Now you can use the "secrets" presented here to catch your own trophy or state record fish.

About the author—Brent Postal.....	back cover
Publisher's introduction.....	1
Special thanks.....	3
What is a trophy fish?.....	4
We're not talking about stocked fish.....	4
Fish size is relative to the size of the water.....	4
Not Spawning fish.....	4
Plan of attack.....	4
Be prepared—scout with a stream and lake map.....	5
Talk to biologists.....	5
The right tools for the job.....	5
The right rod.....	5
The right line.....	6
Line strength.....	6
Line stretch.....	6
The right reel.....	6
Match reel to rod.....	7
Hooks.....	7
Barbless hooks.....	7
More essential tools.....	7
Presentation is the key.....	8
Study your surroundings.....	8
Reading the water.....	8
Water clarity.....	8
The importance of stealth.....	9
What big fish love to eat.....	9
Crayfish.....	9
Not all big-fish eat big-food.....	10
Aquatic invertebrates.....	10
Catch big fish when aquatic insects are emerging.....	11
Terrestrials—big meal for big fish.....	11
Make it move.....	11
How big fish feed.....	12
The best colors for big fish.....	12
Other fish senses.....	12
Digestion times.....	13
When to target big fish.....	13
Temperature.....	13
Before and after spawning.....	14
Spring and fall.....	14
Moon cycles and transitional light.....	14
Pre-frontal conditions.....	15
Where to target big fish.....	15
Big fish ambush points.....	15
Big fish get big because they use cover.....	15
Tactics and techniques.....	16
When all else fails.....	16
Playing a big fish.....	17
The battle.....	17
Landing big fish.....	18
Catch and release.....	19
The best streams, lakes, and river for trophy fish.....	19
The pro's picks.....	19
Where state record and trophy fish have been caught.....	19
Hiring a guide.....	20
Conclusion.....	20
Bibliography.....	21

How Anglers Stalk & Catch Record Fish

By Brent Postal

Copyright © 2010 Vivid Publishing, Inc.
Montoursville, PA
All Rights Reserved

Special Thanks

We would like to extend a special "thank you" to the following fishing pros and acclaimed authors. Their advice and experience have increased the value of this report.

- Lefty Kreh – Fly fishing since 1947, Lefty Kreh is one of the best outdoor writers in the world. He is highly sought out for seminars and casting instructions and has caught countless numbers of fresh and saltwater fish. His books include "Ultimate Guide to fly fishing," and "Fly Fishing for Bass," among others.
- Rich Osthoff – Well-respected outdoor writer and author of several books. Mr. Osthoff has been known to climb mountains to catch trophy fish. His newest book is "Active Nymphing," (Stackpole Books 2006).
- Charles Meck – Author, instructor, and expert fly angler, Charles Meck is a superb trout angler. Check out Mr. Meck's website: charlesmeck.com.
- Doug Hannon – "The Bass Professor", no one knows more about big bass than this man. Mr. Hannon has been on numerous television and radio shows. Check out his website: naturalmotionlures.com.
- Tim Wade – Owner of North Fork Anglers in Cody, Wyoming, Mr. Wade is a guru in the fly fishing world. Check out his website: northforkanglers.com.
- Eric Stroup – Owner of Spruce Creek Outfitters, Eric Stroup guides anglers on some of the best trout water in PA. Check out his website: sprucecreekoutfitters.org.

Their knowledge makes us all better anglers.

What is a trophy fish?

There exists, in the angling fraternity, an inherent quest for the "bigger one". From the weekend warrior to the professional guide, we all want to hook into a fish that we can immortalize in our memories forever. Unfortunately for us, trophy fish are difficult to catch. They are the exceptions, the chosen ones. They're living, breathing examples of what a fish can be if everything goes right. In short, trophy fish are underwater perfection. However, they're not unattainable, they can be caught. We must first prepare ourselves for the game and learn about their prey before we can effectively attempt to deceive them into eating something with a hook attached.

We're not talking about stocked fish

Almost always, the fish of our dreams are native, streambred species. I don't know of anyone who longs to catch a bland, hatchery-born impostor. This report aims to inform anglers about the entire world of native, trophy fish. There are so many things going on underwater that we anglers need to know about to have any chance at consistently netting trophy fish.

Fish size is relative to the size of the water

Every angler has a different idea of what a big fish really is. For instance, experts like Bernie Taylor consider brown and rainbow trout of eight pounds to be trophies. However, it's a simple fact that some creeks cannot hold trout this big. Thus, when the word "trophy" appears in this report it's referring to the biggest native fish a watershed can hold. On hop-across mountain streams a trophy might mean a foot long brook trout. (Brookies are actually members of the char family, but we'll include them with the other trout for the sake of convenience.) Ultimately, there are reasons why some waters can hold bigger fish than others, and we'll delve into those issues as well.

Not spawning fish

We will not be discussing methods for catching spawning fish. This practice is known to be quite detrimental to the fish during the fragile state of reproduction, especially when poor catch and release tactics are used. The subject is too broad and too controversial to be adequately covered in this report. Fortunately, migrations and the act of spawning take place in very short time intervals, thus, there are plenty of other times during the year to catch big fish.

Plan of attack

There's an analogy in football that 90% of the game is half mental. Overlooking the poor structure of that statement, deciphering what it means is simple. An angler must first prepare mentally before ever wetting a line. Practice what could happen in your mind if you were to hook a giant fish under a log, behind a boulder, or in the depths of murky lake. Imagine a monster peeling off your line almost to the end, what will you do? Professional athletes will attest that this mental practice helps them when the time comes to perform. The pros have already thought about the situation and they know their best option.

While it's true that no angler every arrived at their favorite spot, rigged up their equipment, and said, "I really don't care what happens." It's also true that anglers become complacent, lazy, and willing to settle for average. When fishing for trophies, the angler must be confident and focused. Trust that you've chosen a spot that can hold big fish. Believing in a strategy and executing it with energy is crucial. For the lay person, don't half-ass it. Remain focused on the task in front of you and save the daydreaming for rainy days. Typically, you must also forgo the chance at catching small fish when targeting their larger counterparts. The reasons for this will be discussed later.

Be prepared—scout with a stream and lake map

Scouting a watershed beforehand could mean the difference between a five-star gem, and a dried up riverbed. Stream maps can help greatly in this capacity. Professor Higbee's Stream & Lake Maps show the watershed boundaries.

Talk to biologists

When you select a stream you want to try, it is always wise to contact stream biologists and other resources like the Fish and Boat Commission. These knowledgeable sources of information are more often than not perfectly willing to give you details about the water. For example, find out the speed and size of the water. Also inquire about what area the water is neighboring, if there are any guides set up nearby, and if pollution is ever a problem. Requesting this type of information will put you a step ahead before you even get in the car. Now, it's time to gather the gear.

The right tools for the job

Much has been written about the equipment needed for anglers targeting trophy fish. As a basic rule of thumb, use the strongest equipment you can get away with. Let's first look at the only piece of fishing equipment that is constantly in your hands, the rod.

The right rod

Rods come in all shapes and sizes and are made from a number of different materials. All rods are ineffective, however, if the angler does not understand how they work. The rod is a lever between you and you're quarry. All anglers should know these two basic principles. First, raising the rod tip to a completely vertical position maximizes its ability to bend and "give". In contrast, lowering the rod to a horizontal position, parallel to the water, provides the most pressure on the fish. It's important to use both of these principles when fighting a fish, (see the section on playing big fish).

When buying a rod, decipher which type of trophy you are after as well as what type of water they inhabit, and then pick a rod conducive to that type of angling. For instance, a small, wispy, seven foot fly rod will suffice for anglers chasing small mountain brook trout. However, ten pound bass anglers will need a whole different rod altogether. Anglers seeking trophy bass prefer stiff, strong, durable rods that allow them to horse bass out of heavy

cover. Furthermore, steelhead anglers trolling their rods in swift rivers will need long, stiff rods to combat the pace of the water. These rods will bury the hook in the mouth of the fish. This brings us to the line, possibly the most important piece of equipment no matter what fish you're after.

The right line

Lines, like rods, are a dime a dozen. Entire books have been written about lines. Fortunately, the basics are not hard to grasp. Understanding that all lines absorb dirt, increasing the friction in the guide holes of a rod, is a concept that all anglers must account for. This can affect any number of factors, mainly casting. Basically, make sure to clean or replace line after extended use. On that note, the replacing of line usually happens when nicks and abrasions occur. Even seemingly smooth lines look like mountain ranges under heavy magnification. The smallest scratch on the line could mean the difference between catching a fish of a lifetime and hearing the infamous "snap". Most trophy anglers agree with the idea of changing your line after every trophy fish caught. Keep the line and think of it as a way of preserving the fish's memory.

Line strength

The most discussed aspect of fishing line is its strength, normally converted to pound test ratios. The strength of the line encompasses the idea of its diameter. In murky waters, the visibility of fish is reduced markedly as compared with clear waters. Anglers can get away with heavier, fatter line in dirty water. After all, you want the strongest you can get away with. In addition, the contrast between the line and the water color is distinguishable by trophy fish. For example, use a green line in green water.

Line stretch

When it comes to line, what most anglers don't consider is the stretch of the line. The stretch of the line, accompanied by proper fish-playing techniques, is why twenty pound fish can be caught on four pound test line. Generally, a longer line between you and the fish will have more stretch than a shorter one. This is an important facet of lines and will be discussed later in relation to playing big fish.

The right reel

A reel is defined as a revolvable device on which something flexible is wound. Fishing reels go much deeper than this basic definition. For instance, the drag of a reel is of huge importance to the big fish angler. Remember this: the force needed to start the process of giving line is much greater than the force needed to keep it going. Even when fishing for giants, make sure your drag is at a setting light enough that getting the process going can be obtained by the fish. If not, the line will simply break under the pressure. Many instances will induce the tightening of the drag after a fish has been played for a while, giving more resistance to the fish after it has already been tired out. I recall a painful learning experience on the Shoshone River in Wyoming where I didn't use my drag, at all. A monster trout sipped in my fly

roughly fifteen feet away from me. Being so anxious to just get the lunker in my net I pinched the line against my rod, thereby negating any help from the drag setting of my reel, and tried to forcibly pull the trout to my waiting net right away. The line obviously snapped and I appeared quite foolish to a group of onlookers behind me.

Match reel to rod

Matching your reel size to that of your rod is important as well. A big rod with a small reel or vice versa will probably cast poorly and have an uneven weight distribution. Match rod and line weights or ask someone working the fishing department of the store to help you. The amount of line on your reel is also important. You want enough to compensate for a long run by a hooked fish but not so much that it overflows the reel, as this will lead to knots and many headaches. Generally, you want about a quarter of an inch between your line on the spool and the edge of the reel. But, this rule is not set in stone.

Hooks

Hooks, the only piece of equipment that actually touches the fish, need to be specifically suited to the type of trophy fish the angler is pursuing. Hooks used for trophy bass will vary in size, shape, and width as compared to those used for monster trout. However, one thing remains constant of all hooks, and that is that the hook must be sharp. This sounds like a no-brainer, but I know that I've found hooks in my boxes that would be hard-pressed to puncture Styrofoam, let alone the tough jaws of a bass, for instance. Hook sharpening devices are everywhere, choosing the right one is simply a matter of personal preference. Doug Hannon thinks hooks are the most important pieces of equipment an angler has, and he relies on catching fish for a living.

Use barbless hooks

Barbless hooks are becoming all the rage, especially with those anglers dealing with fish that have fragile mouths, (i.e. trout). Obviously, barbless hooks help greatly when removing them from the mouth of any fish. The number of fish lost using barbless hooks, meaning those that would have stayed on with the aid of the barb, is marginal. Expert fly angler and author Charles Meck agrees, "I have not used a barbed hook for the past 25 years". Losing a fish is more often the fault of the angler and not the ingenuity of the fish or failure of equipment.

More essential tools

Hats and polarized sun glasses are essential pieces of equipment for all anglers. These two items will basically give you x-ray vision and allow you to see key underwater features as well as fish. Prominent author and expert fly angler Rich Osthoff believes hats are vital to any angler seeking trophy fish. He says, "A good hat shades the eyes, face, ears, and neck. I once lost my hat on a backcountry trip and fished an entire week with a T-shirt wrapped turban-style around my head. Boy, did I miss that hat.

Presentation is the key

No matter what your setup of gear includes, the way you present your bait, lure, or fly is the most important thing to remember. Bernard "Lefty" Kreh, a living legend in the fly fishing world, believes "presentation is the key with any tackle". If you have the most expensive tools, but don't know how to use them, then you're just wasting your money. Take the time to learn how to cast efficiently. I can't stress this enough. As Mr. Kreh put it, "If you can't shoot, don't hunt. If you can't cast, learn to cast."

Study your surroundings

Reading the water implies simply looking at the water in front of you. However, the trophy angler should also notice things in the environment around them that will influence fishing techniques as well as the behavior of the fish. Perhaps "interpreting the environment" would be a better phrase. When you arrive at your destination, look around for a higher vantage point that will allow you to clearly see fish underwater. This can be invaluable to anglers who can decipher the feeding routes of cruising fish. Remember our plan of attack mentioned earlier, parlay that attitude to when you arrive at your locale. When acclaimed author Charles Meck approaches a stream or river, he already has a distinct plan in mind. "I look for a riffle-pool situation. This type of water is termed ideal for aquatic insects. I prefer fishing a heavy riffle feeding into a deep pool." Take notice to the presence and direction of the wind as it will tell you which way insects get blown on the water. In stillwater, wind direction normally dictates the way the fish will be facing. Pay heed to surrounding elevations and their effects on regulating sunlight on the surface of the water. Birds, too, are important harbingers as they can inform the angler of the presence of flying insects and small baitfish just under the surface.

Reading the water

After you've done those things, it's time to inspect the actual water. A key point to remember is that fish will often lie in slow water and then dart out into faster water to grab food. These places are called seams. For any type of trophy fish, it's all about conserving energy and getting the most from their food. Big fish will always take precedence over their smaller subordinates in any type of water. You can target trophies by fishing the best places in the watershed.

Water clarity

Also take note of the turbidity of the water. Rich Osthoff always pays attention to water clarity no matter where he fishes. "Water color often dictates how I elect to fish, from my fly choice to the direction I present the fly (upstream or down)." Muddy water will mean using techniques that will differ from those used in clear water. Sometimes muddy water means bright lures, flies, or baits. However, keep in mind that you want to create a solid profile that the fish can see through the cloudiness. Sometimes solid black is the way to go. Fish looking upward can clearly see a black outline of a morsel of food in any water. If nothing else, look for foam lines and cover, and go from there.

The importance of stealth

Understanding the water in front of you is a good start. But you must also be able to present your artificial of choice without spooking the fish. Even frightening smaller fish around your projected trophy could alert the big fella' to trouble nearby. You can use the subtleties of the water to your advantage. For instance, use ripples and areas of loud, choppy water to drown out the sounds of your boat or feet. In murky water, when fish have limited vision, you can get quite close to them.

Big waters are usually not a problem when it comes to giving your fish enough elbow room. But, anglers whose trophies include small, mountain brook trout or canal-dwelling bass will need to stalk like a heron. In these cases, avoid stepping in the water at all. The lateral line, which is discussed in depth later, is an awesome alert system to the freshwater fish. Fly anglers will need to be wary of their false casting on small streams. All anglers should take every precaution they can to ensure their trophy fish doesn't even know their hunter exists.

What big fish love to eat

Prey fish and crustaceans are a favored food source of freshwater trophy fish everywhere. They represent a substantial, healthy meal that is usually well worth the energy lost to obtain it. But, big fish don't eat these large foods during all hours of the day. The main reason is that crustaceans and prey fish aren't around during most of the day.

Prey fish, such as sticklebacks, chubs, and minnows have distinct characteristics that big fish readily recognize. The diet of a prey fish is largely made up of zooplankton and small aquatic invertebrates. Zooplankton are a favorite in large, open water. When prey fish eat the zooplankton or underwater bugs, the big fish eat them. Sounds simple enough, right? Just when and for how long prey fish are feeding can be the difficult part of the equation. Generally, these fish feed at night and into the early morning. There are two reasons for this. The first is because their prey generally moves under the cover or darkness. The second, the prey fish believe that the cover of darkness protects them from predators. (This whole process is influenced by moon cycles that are discussed later.) During the day, prey fish are often hiding under rocks or gathering together in schools, both of these actions are intended for protection against their hunters. Camouflaged sticklebacks can often be found clinging to rocks, or hiding near bridge piers. Minnows will clump together in schools. Resting schools will normally tread water with every fish facing a different direction. More eyes equal more security. When chased the schools tend to lengthen and become thinner, providing greater maneuverability.

Crayfish

Crayfish are hearty meals on which big fish normally love to dine, especially just after the crayfish has molted, turning it a brighter color. After a molt, a crayfish is soft and chewy as compared to its normal, tough exoskeleton. If given a choice, big fish will always eat a freshly molted crayfish over a hard bodied one. Like prey fish, crayfish will hide during the day,

usually under rocks, coming out at night to feed. When pursued, crayfish swim backwards in short, quick bursts with their claws dragging in front of them. Imitations should do the same.

Not all-big fish eat big-food

It's widely believed that there comes a point in a fish's life where they make the transition from small foods, such as aquatic invertebrates and terrestrials, to bigger meals like prey fish and crustaceans. One common exception to this is if there are no prey fish or crustaceans in the area. In these cases, fish grow large by eating massive amounts of smaller food sources. Another possible explanation of why a big fish didn't eat your perfectly presented bait is because, early in life, the fish had a negative experience with the natural food source. For instance, a young bass tries to eat a crayfish and, in the process of swallowing it, the crayfish struggles and pinches the bass. This bass will likely shy away from crayfish as a food source, perhaps for as long as it lives. Positive experiences will lead to the opposite. Fish will seek out those sources of food.

Aquatic Invertebrates

When most people hear the term aquatic insects, they picture small bugs that are eaten only by fish making up the lower part of the food chain. Apparently, they've never seen a dobsonfly (hellgrammite) or giant stonefly. These guys can grow to multiple inches in length, and are often equipped with impressive "pinchers" that can make even the toughest mountain man think twice before grabbing one. Many fly anglers such as Charles Meck believe that aquatic insects, not prey fish or crustaceans, make up the largest part of a trout's diet. In many cases, the same is true for other freshwater fish.

Individual species of aquatic invertebrates behave in their own special ways and are found in their own special places. However, wherever they are present, you can bet big fish know about them. These water-dwelling insects are found in both moving water, like streams and rivers, as well as inactive water, such as lakes and ponds. Let's first discuss aquatic invertebrates in moving water.

Fish encounter aquatic insects in moving water in three ways: Catastrophic, Behavioral, and Continuous drifts. Catastrophic drift applies to a large, naturally or unnaturally induced factor that, which results in a major flow of aquatic nymphs. (Despite the beauty of a flying aquatic insect, they live as underwater nymphs for almost all of their lives.) Catastrophic drifts can be natural occurrences, i.e. heavy rainfall, or a herd of animals walking along the bottom of a watershed. These occurrences "kick up" aquatic nymphs, which are in turn left to drift downstream in moving water or left scrambling back down to cover in stagnant water. Catastrophic type of drift can also be manmade. Some examples of this include a release of water from a dam and a boat's motor propelling water into the bottom of a watershed. Behavioral drift, usually at night, is characterized by an instinctive movement towards food sources, which is generally periphyton. This movement leads to a large number of nymphs out and about ready to be eaten by awaiting predators. Continuous drift simply refers to insects becoming dislodged throughout the course of a day. Perhaps they lost their grip or took a chance that didn't pay off.

Aquatic insects in slow moving water normally differ from their fast water cousins. Two species likely to be found around lakes and ponds are dragonflies and scuds (freshwater shrimp-like organisms). Dragonfly nymphs feed mostly on other invertebrates, but have also been seen eating vertebrates like tadpoles and small fish! In their adult stage, dragonflies are often intentionally introduced due to their appetite for insects regarded as pests, such as mosquitoes. Big fish cruising for scuds will often gorge themselves on the abundance of this food source, leaving their mouths open as they inhale the scuds. Oftentimes, the fish perusing for scuds will have distinct cruising routes that should be noted by the angler.

Catch big fish when aquatic insects are emerging

If you've ever seen a large hatch of insects, and the fish feeding on them, then you already know the importance of this phenomenon. Hatches, in one way or another, affect every fish in the water. Tailwater anglers know about the importance of hatches as they normally catch their biggest fish when aquatic insects are emerging. The big four: trichoptera or caddis flies, ephemeroptera or mayflies, plecoptera or stoneflies, and chironomid or midges all have their own methods of living, feeding, emerging, mating, and dying. I suggest researching the subject; it's amazing what these little guys can do both under and above water.

Terrestrials—big meal for big fish

Terrestrial insects refers to the grasshoppers, ants, beetles, crickets, and other insects that don't live in the water but often find themselves in it. Summer is the most productive time to fish these insects. They are an extremely important food source for big fish, as they represent a big meal that's not hard to obtain. More often than not, a terrestrial floating on the water was put there by the wind, blowing the insect from a nearby foothold. There is a myth that fishing these insects near shorelines is the only way to go. While terrestrials often land near the shore, they seldom stay there. In moving water, everything will eventually be brought to the center. Last year I had a lot of success fishing grasshopper imitations in the middle of Wyoming's superb trout rivers. In static water, they'll squirm around and often end up far from shore.

Make it move

The best way to fish terrestrials is to give them movement. Whether you're using a real land-dwelling bug, a lure that looks like one, or a fly imitation of one, be sure to give it movement. Splash it down on the water with your cast and make it appear as if it were struggling to stay afloat. After all, that's what the naturals do. Big fish of all kinds will relish the opportunity to eat a terrestrial and usually rise viciously. One terrestrial that should be in every angler's arsenal is the ant. There are almost 12,000 known species of ants in the world! Lefty Kreh, perhaps the best fly angler anywhere, fishes ant patterns with success on many watersheds for various species. And he doesn't just fish them on the surface. "Fish see more ants under the surface than on top." After a while, these insects will become waterlogged and sink under the surface. You should present your offering in a similar manner.

How big fish feed

Energy conservation is almost always the name of the game when it comes to the feeding habits of big fish. Fish want to eat something that will give them more energy than was required to obtain the food. In moving water especially, when treading water constantly, big fish will normally rest in slower water and then zip out to grab food in the current. Then, they'll return back to their slow water spot until the next morsel floats by. So just how do they detect food in the first place?

The best colors for big fish

The most used method by big fish for determining the validity of potential food is to simply look at it. (The actual cones of vision will differ in varying species of fish.) Fish see colors in varying degrees. Red has the longest wavelength of any color, and these are absorbed quickly underwater. Fish can see red, in clear water, only up to 12 feet for so. In turbid water, red might only be seen a few inches under the surface! This is why those spectacular coral reef pictures are taken with a flash, to expose colors like red that would not otherwise be visible. Doug Hannon, the bass professor, has done considerable research on this topic. He agrees that red is a poor choice of lure for deep or murky water fishing conditions. However, he explains how red can be useful. "Red is rare and it's more distinctive when seen. It can represent things like blood or gills. Mostly, this color represents something that's alive. Fish tend to key in on red in water that's eight feet or less." Orange and yellow are next to fade away underwater. But, you might not want to use these colors for a reason other than their poor visibility. These colors are often used as repellents in nature. The act of using bright colors to deter predators is called aposematic coloration. Poisonous frogs and certain salamanders are two examples of species with aposematic colorations. These yellow and orange colors on baits are probably viewed as warning signs to fish. However, as Mr. Hannon points out, yellow and orange are okay when used in moderation. He says, "It's alright to use yellow and orange, but they shouldn't be your primary color. Use them for things like the tip of your bait's tail." The colors fish can see clearly in water of considerable depth are the shorter wavelength colors such as blue, indigo, and violet. Remember when selecting your bait, lure, or fly, that the intensity of the light and the depth of the water are two key factors in determining which colors to use. Fishing murky water on a cloudy day with a red lure is foolish. On a clear day, a blue lure will be seen as far down as the light can penetrate. Also, adjust your bait's coloring to the changing seasonal colors. Spring brings with it light colors as things are reborn and rejuvenated. In winter, however, the colors of the environment turn more opaque.

Other fish senses

Mainly, big fish will use their sight to detect food. However, there are certain instances where fish need to rely on their other senses in addition to sight. In muddy water, for example, big fish rely on their olfactory sense of smell as well as their lateral line to determine the validity of food. Some fly anglers will rub their fly in the silt of a watershed to extract all of the negative cues, like human scents, that can deter a fish from biting. Rattling lures and splashy flies are noticed by the inner ears and lateral line of fish.

They feel the vibrations of the water, and oftentimes swim over to see what all the commotion is about.

Some fish have adapted ways to eat food with morphological defenses, things like spines and tough shells. Large trout, for example, cannot eat sticklebacks tail-first. Thus, the trout will stun the prey fish at its tail, rendering it immobile, then turn the spiny stickleback around and eat it headfirst. This prevents the spines from flaring out and becoming stuck in the trout's throat.

Digestion times

After a meal is swallowed, it must be digested. In fish, this can take quite a while. Temperature plays an important role in the digestion process. In water that is significantly colder and warmer than preferred, fish will digest food more slowly, and therefore eat less. The food in their stomachs will last them much longer than it will during active feeding times. This is why the fishing seems to turn off in the hottest days of summer and during the winter months.

Many studies have been done demonstrating rates of metabolism in certain fish species. In the book, *The Best of Bassmaster*, there is an article by Rick Taylor describing the metabolism of bass. Mr. Taylor writes, "Biologists have found that a bass needs to eat the equivalent of 3 percent of its body weight each day to grow normally...and 1 percent to maintain its present weight and health." He explains later that studies have shown it takes 20 hours for bass to empty their stomachs in their preferred water temperatures, and 30 hours in uncomfortable temperatures. In Bernie Taylor's book about big trout, he provides information regarding a trout's metabolic rate. Rainbow trout take 16 hours to evacuate protein pellets in optimal temperatures, and 72 hours in the cold of winter. The 'bows also take 16 hours to evacuate worms in ideal temperatures, and 59 hours in the winter. He explains that "In the wild, a stomach full of insects will take less time to digest than protein pellets and flesh since they are less dense and contain more water."

When to target big fish

There are certain times when trophy fish are actively feeding, and certain times when they're not. However, don't get caught up on terms like "active feeding". You can catch fish when they're not active. Obviously, your success will be greater when fish are on the feed. Several factors determine when this is.

Temperature

Let's first look at air temperature and its relationship to water temperature. When the air temperature rises, it's normally a safe bet that the water temperature will too. If the water was unfavorably cold before the warming begins, the fish activity will increase as the water temps increase. If the water was already too warm, its increasing will only make the fishing that much worse. The water temperature relates to the metabolism rate discussed earlier. A trophy fish can eat much less in unfavorable temperatures because their metabolism is much slower than normal.

Before and after spawning

Spring and fall are the two best seasons to catch trophy fish. The reasons are many. For one, many fish spawn in the spring and fall. Before their spawning runs they like to gorge themselves and ensure a healthy supply of fat reserves for the taxing acts of spawning. Similarly, once spawning is complete, big fish will look to replenish themselves and will need to eat plenty of food that was lost during the spawning process. All in all, before and after spawning is a great time to fish for trophies.

Spring and fall

Trophy trout anglers normally prefer fishing the months of spring for numerous reasons. Rich Osthoff says, "I like warm spring days because trout are often aggressive and primed to bust a big nymph or streamer on the first presentation, so I can prospect a lot of water quickly." Charles Meck likes springtime fishing too, "If you are fly fishing for trout the best time to land trophy trout is the last two weeks in May and the first week in June. This is the time of the hatches, and foods like these hatches bring plenty of large trout feeding on them."

Trophy bass anglers also like to target spring and fall days. Eric Stroup said the best time for bass was the pre-spawn spring period. More specifically, Doug Hannon knows the precise times to catch the big ones. I asked him what time of day can most big fish be caught, he replied, "The middle of the day; this is when they're really feeding, between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m." In Bass Wisdom, Homer Circle discusses the fall period as follows, "The urge to fatten up for winter combined with decreased food availability at this time of year can produce some wild feeding forays."

Moon cycles and transitional light

Many people believe in following moon cycles and periods of "transitional light". Here's what these anglers believe. The moon can provide a lot of light at times, and big fish often have an advantage over their prey for several reasons. Generally, at night, they prey of big fish and let their guard down under the cover of presumed darkness. During the right conditions, this can be a fatal mistake. Fish have rods and cones that they adjust, similar to humans, to better see in high and low light conditions. Sudden changes in light yield poor vision in both fish and humans. For instance, when we wake up early in the morning and turn on the lights, we're blinded. Inversely, if we walk into a dark room in the middle of a sunny day we can't see anything. Fish undergo the same reactions. Now, the sun and moon sometimes rise and set at times that provide long transitions from light to dark. For instance, the moon rises before the sun sets, or the sun rises before the moon sets. There are also times where the setting of the sun is accompanied by complete darkness, such as when the moon rises well after the sun sets. Trophy fish feed best during the transitional light periods. Bernie Taylor's big trout book discusses this phenomenon in great detail. To sum up his findings, there is a long evening transition (moon rises before sun sets) during days 2 through 10 of the 29 day moon phases.

There is also a lengthy morning period of transitional light (sun rises before moon sets) during days 18 through 25. Rich Osthoff and Eric Stroup are both believers in the transitional light theory. Mr. Osthoff told me, "I routinely target periods of transitional light." Fishing times of transitional light can produce great results.

Pre-frontal conditions

Perhaps the best times to fish are those associated with frontal conditions. Pre-frontal conditions consistently yield big fish for several reasons. Cloud cover, wind, changing light and temperature conditions are all pre-frontal conditions. But, barometric pressure is the biggest factor to be considered. As the front approaches, the barometer drops and trophy fish become active. In Bill Murphy's giant bass book, frontal conditions comprise a couple of highly informative pages. Mr. Murphy writes, "Barometric conditions are the real cause of big bass activity." Fish hard a couple days before a front and you will catch more trophy fish.

Where to target big fish

We've already stated that big fish will always occupy the best spots in a watershed. More so, they will stay relatively close to those spots at all times. Doug Hannon told me that big bass territory is about 7 acres, or a 200 yard by 200 yard area. He also said that, "Big bass are generally in eight feet (of water) or less. This is mainly because they can move from surface to bottom without adjusting their bladder control."

Big fish ambush points

I asked Mr. Hannon about ambush points, which apply to most species of freshwater fish and not just bass. The answer I got was to consider an hourglass. At the skinny part, all the sand is jam-packed in a small area. Then, of course, the sand is allowed to spread out again in the wide portion of the hourglass. Places like this in rivers, lakes, reservoirs, etc. have the same funneling effect with prey. Target these channels, especially those with vegetation, for trophy fish. Examples include tree lines in a reservoir. Vegetation and brush often house baitfish during the daytime hours. When one ventures out, a large fish often capitalizes.

Big fish get big because they use cover

Cover is a huge aspect of trophy fishing that all the experts look for no matter where they fish. Cover includes rocks, trees, shrubs, weeds, or anything else that is stationary and lies in or above water. Bill Murphy's book, *In Pursuit of Giant Bass*, provides a good definition of how fish use cover. It says, "Big bass are exceptional daylight feeders and when they hunt during daylight hours their strategy is to sneak using structure and cover elements for concealment."

When thinking about which areas to target on a watershed remember this; all fish want to conserve their energy. In moving water this often means lying in slow water, then venturing out to faster water that carries food. A large rock in the middle of a stream or river will most likely have a fish in front and behind it.

Here the fish can hold in slow water and be fed continuously throughout the day. These places are called seams, and trophy trout anglers are quite familiar with them. In still water, cover can provide shade, food sources, protection, and an ambush point. Vegetation can provide the water with oxygen, (the product of photosynthesis). No matter where you fish, targeting cover is usually a good strategy.

Tactics and techniques

First of all, presentation is everything, and it varies every single day. An angler that has all the best gear but doesn't have good presentation of their lure of choice will catch far fewer fish than one with crappy gear and stellar presentation. This means more than just putting your lure in front of the fish; it's putting it there in a way that the fish will want to strike it. Sometimes you put it there naturally, sometimes you don't. Aside from the old tried and true, new techniques have risen to the forefront of trophy angling over the past couple decades. Trolling and tandem rigging are two newer fish-catching methods that are becoming popular worldwide.

There are a couple time-tested baits, flies and lures that continually catch big fish around the world. Let's face it, libraries could be written regarding different baits, lures, flies, and tactics for catching big fish. So, I'll just point out the figureheads from which most all lures are derived. We all are aware of the majesty that is the worm. Plastic, live, and fly-tied worms are all effective and will be until the end of time. Worms come in a whole gamut of colors. They're durable, flexible, modifiable, and any other adjectives you want to throw in there. Next, are the minnow representatives. As a natural food source for big fish almost everywhere, minnows and those in the minnow family are a favorite among fish and anglers alike. They represent a hearty meal that most freshwater trophies can't resist.

When all else fails

Every angler knows there are times when no matter what we do, we can't catch a fish. This keeps us coming back and makes catching a big one that much more enjoyable. But I wanted to cut down on the times I get skunked so I asked the pros what they do when all else fails. Lefty Kreh told me no matter where you fish, the place is sure to have ants. I tried an ant on a local stream when I ran out of ideas and guess what, it worked. I caught five fish in quick succession. Tim Wade of North Fork Anglers said he puts on a minnow imitation when he's stumped. Doug Hannon said, "Downsize when all else fails and try to be natural." Rich Osthoff adds lively movement to his repertoire when he's about to end his day fishless. When Charles Meck can't catch a fish he adds another fly onto his line. "Fishing a dry fly and a wet fly at the same time has dramatically increased the number of trout that I catch," he says. Eric Stroup told me he likes to throw something the fish haven't seen, usually large. The fact is, even the best anglers in the world come home empty sometimes. I don't get discouraged when I can't catch fish, I get excited. I get excited that I have to figure out what it is I'm not doing correctly. Every day on the water is a learning experience, and every big fish caught is a pat on the back because for that moment, you figured it out.

Playing a big fish

Setting the hook seems like a simple concept, and really, it is. However, you should always consider the many angles that come into play when you set the hook on a lunker fish. And patience is often the key when striking, (setting the hook). I know I've lost a lot of fish because I pulled the hook right out of their mouths. I've also lost big fish because my strike was too hard, and my line snapped. Setting the hook is almost an art form, and it's much easier said than done, especially with the big guys.

The battle

If and when you do hook a trophy, the battle is on. You don't have the luxury to just pull big fish in like the little ones. You're constantly adjusting to their reactions and sometimes making them adjust to yours. In fact, that is one thing you should always try to do when playing a big fish. Make the fish play by your rules. A lot of guides and professional anglers know that keeping the fish off balance is very important. This is usually done by altering your rod angle. The tug that the fish feels is now coming from a different direction than it was before. The fish therefore needs to adjust, and this constant adjusting can tire any big fish out quicker than just letting it run.

Watch an expert angler reel in a big fish and you'll notice one thing right off the bat, they're cool, calm, and collected. Even amidst heavy breathing and an insane heart rate, the pros make it look easy. It looks easy because it's done smoothly, calmly. Save the shouting and yelling for the quick hero shot of you holding your trophy. We've already mentioned rod angles and their effect on fish. Remember that a rod held straight up has more give than one held straight out.

Never, unless you have no choice such as on a boat, should you remain stationary when playing a big fish. Move with the fish and in moving water try to keep it upstream of you. This forces the fish to not only fight you, but also the flow of the current. Also remember that the closer the fish gets to you, the more at risk you are of losing it. This is due to the stretch in the line being minimized as the fish gets closer.

Then there are those times when you can't control a fish. Maybe as soon as you hooked it the fish headed for a downed log. Or maybe you hooked it there to begin with. Here is where you'll need to be on your toes. If a fish heads for or is already in cover, sometimes letting up on the pressure will make it think the fight is over. And it will come out. Another slack technique is used when a large fish gets downstream of you, and for some reason you can't follow it. Big trout in particular like to sulk downstream and rest. In these cases it sometimes pays to let a big slack loop get carried by the current and flow right past the fish. When it tightens, the fish will feel pressure from below it. If all goes well the fish will want to fight that pressure and will surge back upstream into a more manageable position.

Almost every trophy freshwater angler has had to deal with a jump out of the water by their quarry. When the fish landed, not every angler still had it on. Bowing to the fish is a concept used by many. When the fish jumps, point your rod right at it,

lower it, and let out slack if possible. There are multiple reasons for doing this. One, if the fish were to land on a taut line when it falls back to the water, the line will likely break. But bowing to the fish means the line will be slack, and will not snap when pounds of fish land on it. Another reason is that, especially with small hooks and really large fish, that hook is grabbing a very small piece of meat. With a tight line, a jumping fish that shakes in the air will likely cause the hook to pull right out. If you give slack, however, the fish will have nothing to pull against. Lefty Kreh gave me an important fact to remember when playing an active fish. Mr. Kreh informed me that a fish weighs 1/10th its actual weight when it's underwater. It's ten times heavier above water. This is why you can move large boulders underwater that you couldn't otherwise budge on land.

Landing big fish

Now you've hooked your fish of a lifetime, played it in towards you, and all you have to do is land it. Sounds easy enough right? Well this is the point where many anglers, myself included, have lost those big fish. We were so consumed with the struggle that we didn't remember to keep our legs closed, or hold our rods up.

There are obvious differences between landing small fish versus trophy fish. For example, a small fish can be hoisted onto a boat, or lifted up by the line a few inches above it. They can also be carefully grasped with one hand. And they are oftentimes out of gas, not able to resist anymore. A trophy on the other hand, is probably too heavy to be picked up by the line or hoisted upwards. They're also not easy to hold in even both hands. Trophies also seem to have that last hurrah right before you think they're spent. Let me solve all of these problems with one simple solution, a net.

The benefits of using a net are clear as day. Aside from the ones I've already mentioned, a net allows us to not directly touch the fish, if we plan to release it, that is. The acids on our hands and the sensitivity of the scales on fish is a deadly combination. We can also control a fish much better with a net than we ever could without one. One of the things I hate seeing most on a stream is another angler wrestling with a flopping fish. Sometimes these anglers last resorts are to step on the fish and yank the hook out. A net keeps the fish in a controlled environment where flopping can be minimized. Nets are also very useful when you want take that great picture of the fish of lifetime. You can keep it in the net, underwater, until you're ready for the photo.

Whether you're keeping the trophy or not, you'll need to remove the hook in some way. The only exception here is when you plan to release the fish and it has swallowed the hook. A good way to unhook a fish without touching it is to run your fingers down the line right to the hook. Grasp the top of the hook and lightly jiggle it. (You can even do this underwater and therefore never touch the fish and never force it to hold its breath.) This method often pops the hook out. If you do plan to release a fish that simply engulfed your hook to nearly its stomach, cutting the line is not a bad way to go. Reach down as far as you can to the hook before cutting the line. Leaving the hook in is fine, but leaving the hook in with two feet of line sticking out of the fish's mouth is trouble. This line could get tangled and/or greatly reduce the fish's ability to feed.

For those catch and release anglers, reviving a fish is commonplace, especially the big ones. Place one hand under the wrist (skinny part before the tail) and one under the belly near the pectoral fin. Hold the fish in flowing water and slowly walk it forward. Reviving a fish in the back and forth motion is not the best idea, as bringing the fish down with the current reverses the normal route of oxygen, and does little if anything for the fish. A successful revival of any fish that would have otherwise died is an uplifting experience. I remember a large mountain whitefish I caught in Wyoming that I resurrected and watched swim away after careful rehabilitation.

The best streams, lakes, and rivers for trophy fish

Of course, I have my favorite spots for trophy fish. And, of course, I'm not about to tell you where they are. But, I did ask the professionals where they would want to fish if they could fish anywhere tomorrow. Every trophy trout angler I asked, (Tim Wade, Charles Meek, Rich Osthoff, and Lefty Kreh), said either Montana or Wyoming. Doug Hannon and other freshwater trophy anglers said Texas or Louisiana.

The pro's picks

If you're looking for specific places to catch trophy fish, here are a handful of top-notch fisheries:

- Awesome Lake – Labrador, Canada - (brook trout)
- Frying Pan River – Basalt, Colorado - (trout)
- Higgins Lake – Michigan – (pike)
- North Fork of the Shoshone River – Cody, Wyoming - (trout)
- Montgomery Lake – Georgia - (largemouth bass)
- Lake Fork Reservoir – Texas - (largemouth bass)
- The Catskills – Roscoe, New York – (trout)
- Dale Hollow Lake – Tennessee – (smallmouth bass)
- Lake Erie – Erie, Pennsylvania – (many species)
- Yellowstone River – Yellowstone National Forest - (trout)

Where state record and trophy fish have been caught

Streams, rivers and lakes where previous state record and trophy fish have been caught could very well be one of the spots where you hook up with your own trophy or possibly a state record fish.

A list of the currently published maps is located at www.streammaps.com - Vivid Publishing has plans to complete a Professor Higbee's® Stream and Lake Map for all 50 United States by the end of 2010. You may sign up for a special pre-publication discount coupon (25% off). You will receive your coupon prior to the publication date. There is no obligation to purchase. You can sign-up or order maps and books at: www.streammaps.com

Hiring a guide

A guide can be the difference between a trophy fish and a frustrating day. In fact, it's a guide's job to be that difference. In his book about trophy trout, Bernie Taylor says, "There is nothing more valuable for finding places where the fish are present at a specific time of year than hiring a guide who spends a great deal of time on a local water." In addition, don't feel like you're less of an angler because you hired a guide. Some very high clientele enlist in the help of these professional anglers. All in all, a guide usually lives in an area and knows the characteristics of the water better than the most anglers, especially those coming from different areas of the world.

It's also important to remember, however, that a guide can only do so much. As professional guide Eric Stroup put it, "A guide can only take you to the fish and help you prepare to catch a fish; however, it is ultimately up to the angler to catch the fish." Your guide should also be unpretentious yet timely with their advice. He or she should never fish unless you tell them it's okay or the guide specifically needs to show you something. Ask the guide questions via phone or in person before you agree to solicit their services. I can personally say that I've never met a guide I didn't like.

Conclusion

Encompassed in this report was just the tip of iceberg in the vast realm of angling for trophy fish. More important than what you read, however, is what you do. Take to the water as much as possible and have the frame of mind that you'll learn something new on each trip out. Take a notebook and jot things down if you think that will help. In addition, it's always wise to consult a stream map. When I'm in Pennsylvania my stream map sits directly above my bed, and I consult it everyday.

I hope this report, in some way or another, has made the reader a better trophy fish angler. There's nothing wrong with catching small fish, but it's the crème de la crème that we remember forever. It's the ten pound largemouth with a baseball-sized jaw, the three feet of powerful walleye equipped with daggers for teeth, and the eight pound brown trout that made our reels scream for mercy that we never forget. Undoubtedly there are scores of trophy fish that will never even be seen by a human, let alone caught. But if we manage to fool one, just one, well then we're gaining on them. When we catch a trophy, the gap between their world and ours is slightly reduced, we become more confident, and we enjoy the sport of fishing that much more.

Bibliography

- ¹Bernie Taylor, *Big Trout: How and Where to Target Trophies*. (Guilford: The Lyons Press, 2002), 129-142.
- ²Taylor, *Big Trout*, The Lyons Press.
- ³Rick Taylor, "The Feeding Factor: How Much and How Often Does a Bass Eat," in *The Best of Bassmaster: A "How-To" Treasury*, (Montgomery: B.A.S.S. Publications, 1987), 11-14.
- ⁴Taylor, *Big Trout*, The Lyons Press.
- ⁵Homer Circle, *Bass Wisdom*. (New York: The Lyons Press, 2000), 56.
- ⁶Taylor, *Big Trout*, The Lyons Press.
- ⁷Bill Murphy, *In Pursuit of Giant Bass*. (El Cajon: Giant Bass Publishing, 1992), 85-88.
- ⁸Taylor, *Big Trout*, The Lyons Press.